



THE INTRIGUING ASSOCIATION BETWEEN PRINCIPAL UNIONIZATION AND CHARTER SCHOOL ACADEMIC OUTCOMES



On average, charter schools' academic **outcomes** are no better or worse than the outcomes of traditional public schools. That's because, as with traditional public schools, results are uneven, with some charter schools doing well while others flail.

One factor that may help explain this unevenness is principal collective bargaining, suggests a **new study published in *Leadership and Policy in Schools***, a peer-reviewed journal.

For the study, NEPC Fellow Eunice S. Han of the University of Utah drew upon 2003-2012 *Schools and Staffing surveys* from the National Center for Education Statistics to find that charter schools in which the principal participates in collective bargaining are 39 percent more likely than non-unionized charter schools to make Adequate Yearly Progress toward meeting state standards under the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, which was reauthorized in 2015 as the Every Student Succeeds Act. To create an apples-to-apples comparison between unionized and non-unionized charter schools, Han used propensity-score matching (PSM). When it is impractical or impossible to explore cause and effect by randomly assigning some people to a "treatment" group and some to a control group that does not receive the treatment of interest—in this case collective bargaining—PSM is a useful approach to create comparable groups.

Work-environment issues may help explain why unionized principals' charter schools outperform the charter schools of non-unionized principals. Unionized charter principals earn 16 percent more than non-unionized charter principals. They work eight percent fewer hours and four percent fewer days. Their turnover is lower. They more frequently receive formal

evaluations from their supervisors, and, in turn, they conduct more informal evaluations of their schools' teachers.

“The findings of this study suggest that the informal evaluation of teachers, compared to formal evaluation, may be more beneficial in improving school performance,” Han writes.

This may be because more frequent informal teacher evaluation fosters a collaborative culture in which principals and teachers work together and commit to an open flow of information and communication. Moreover, considering that formal evaluation is more costly, school administrators and policy makers may consider conducting more regular informal teacher evaluation.

Professor Han's findings are notable because an initial goal of charter schools was to provide their principals with more autonomy than is typically offered to principals of traditional public schools. District leadership is typically removed from the equation (although charter-management organization rules and leaders may be a factor). When principals are provided with more authority and discretion, they may play an outsized role in their schools' performance.

This study by Professor Han is the first rigorous effort to examine the association between students' academic outcomes and charter principals' collective bargaining and working conditions. A larger body of research should be developed before reaching any strong policy conclusions. But given the study's compelling findings, additional research seems warranted.

NEPC Resources on Charter Schools

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